

Montreal couple builds school in Ethiopia

Janice Arnold
Staff Reporter

When Julie Schneiderman returned to her job in January, her colleagues were surprised to learn that she had spent the holiday break in a remote region of Ethiopia helping to build a school.

Schneiderman, 35, a communications specialist for a pharmaceutical firm, and her husband, real estate developer Benjamin Sternthal, 40, were in the African country in December to see the construction of a two-room schoolhouse they conceived and raised the funds for in Shumargie, a village in northern Ethiopia, near Gondar.

The Montreal couple, veteran travellers in Africa and other parts of the developing world, are the volunteer co-founders of the Kulam Project. The school, which should be completed this month, is their first project, and they have ambitious plans for more humanitarian aid in Ethiopia and Rwanda in the years to come.

Kulam means "everybody" in Hebrew, and the name reflects their wish is to help anyone in need, regardless of their origin. The couple is motivated by the deeply held Jewish values of tzedakah and tikkun olam.

Almost half of the \$21,000 for this initial project was raised among non-Jews, anglophones and francophones, the great majority personal and business associates from Montreal, Sternthal said.

The couple paid out of pocket the costs of setting up Kulam and travel, in order that 100 per cent of the proceeds would go to the project.

"Within about six months, this project has gone from conception, to raising the funds, to completion," Sternthal noted.

Kulam was founded about a year ago, and soon after that, the two married.

Kulam is working in partnership with Ve'ahavta, a Toronto-based Jewish humanitarian and relief organization, and the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the international aid agency that has been working in Ethiopia for decades.

Ve'ahavta, which means "you should love" in Hebrew, has been a constituent agency of Canadian Jewish Congress since 1999, and works locally and internationally on a non-sectarian basis. This is its first collaboration with an Ethiopian project.

Ve'ahavta, Sternthal said, is providing guidance, as well as operational basics that allow Kulam to have virtually no overhead. Ve'ahavta issues the charitable tax receipts to donors, which means Kulam has avoided the expense of being registered with the Canadian Revenue Agency.

It also contributed Kinder Kits for each of the 60 students of the Shumargie school. These backpacks filled with school supplies are really appreciated because the kids often carry their books in old flour sacks.

The Montrealers are inspired by Rick Hodes, the American physician who has been the JDC's medical director in Ethiopia since the 1980s. Kulam brought Hodes, who was a 2007 finalist in the program CNN Heroes, to Montreal twice last year to speak at Federation CJA and Concordia University. They are also raising money for medical supplies for Hodes.

Sternthal and Schneiderman decided to build a school on the advice of the JDC, which is overseeing the project on the ground. The existing school is little more than an open-air hut constructed of tree branches, which provided no protection from the elements.

The new school, going up a few yards away, has a poured concrete foundation, reinforced concrete walls and a metal roof, and is sturdy enough to withstand an earthquake. Proper desks will be supplied, something they did not have.

The contractor and labourers are all local so there is an economic spinoff as well.



Julie Schneiderman and Benjamin Sternthal, foreground, hold a Kulam sign at the site of a new school in Ethiopia. At right is JDC medical director Dr. Rick Hodes and standing in the centre at back is JDC Ethiopian director Manlio Dell'Arliccia.

Schneiderman and Sternthal, who spent two and three weeks, respectively, in Ethiopia helped with the physical work, but paid the workers the same wages they would otherwise get.

The couple expects to return to Ethiopia soon after the completion. Schneiderman will be bringing the personal touch of paintings made by her mother's Grade 3 students at the Talmud Torah in Vancouver to decorate their rooms.

"We want to do a handful of projects a year, but do them well," Sternthal said.

Shumargie is near Gondar, which was the historic home of Ethiopia's Jews. There are almost none there today, only a few thousand people who claim Jewish ancestry.

Ethiopia is two-thirds Christian and one-third Muslim today, but Sternthal said the people feel a strong kinship to the Jewish people and Israel.

They know the project is connected to the Jewish community and are grateful for it, he said.

While the names of the three partner organizations are acknowledged at the construction site, the school will bear no plaque of the donors' names or other recognition. This is the kind of low-key philanthropy that appeals to the couple; their reward is simply knowing that some good is being done. The school will become the property of the government.

The idea of doing something that might change people's lives in Africa came to the couple during Chanukah 2008. They were on a backpacking vacation and towards the end of the holiday they were in Malawi, in a fishing village on the great Lake Malawi.

That evening they lit their tin menorah on the beach. The children were fascinated – candles are a luxury – and a crowd soon formed. The Montrealers explained what they were doing.

"The kids started running around screaming 'kanukah' and joined in the prayers and singing. It was a special moment, being there in the middle of Africa, celebrating a Jewish holiday with these children," said Sternthal.

"We knew then we had to use our talents, do something on our own initiative, and not with some big organization. We wanted to be hands-on."

Their next major project will be building wells.

As it is now, women are walking two kilometres every day to get water from a river that is polluted, Schneiderman said. It's not only time consuming, laborious and a health risk, but the women may be in danger along the route.

Wells to clean groundwater can be built near their homes at a cost of about \$3,500 in about eight weeks.

"We don't want to stand on a podium or get a medal; just seeing those smiling faces is enough," Sternthal said.

"It's special that we have this shared passion; and can do this together," Schneiderman added.